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Think Globally...Eat Locally

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Some will find the claim that going local is the single most effective response to globalisation to be exaggerated and unrealistic.

Buy how *realistic* is it to continue pulling the entire global population into a single economy?

Today, local economies still meet a large proportion of the needs of roughly half the world's people, mostly in 'developing' countries. Will their lives be improved if we destroy these economies? What can globalisation offer the majority, other than unrealistic promises?

Localisation involves less social and environmental upheaval than globalisation, and it is far less costly to implement. In fact, every aspect of the local, whether at the policy level or in our communities brings with it a whole cascade of benefits. Localisation essentially means shifting economic activity into the hands of millions of small- and medium-sized businesses instead of concentrating it in fewer and fewer mega-corporations.

Localisation doesn't mean that every community has to be entirely self-reliant; it simply means shortening the distance between producers and consumers wherever possible. Since food is something everyone, everywhere, needs every day, a shift from global food to local food is the best place to start. People all over the world are learning that global food is too costly--socially, environmentally *and* economically. They are beginning to seek out local food, and a whole movement is gaining ground.

### **What is 'global food'?**

In order to shift direction towards rebuilding local food systems, it is useful to understand how we arrived at our current predicament. Global food is based on a simple economic theory: instead of producing a diverse range of food crops, every nation and region should specialise in one or two globally-traded commodities – those they can produce cheaply enough to compete with every other producer. The proceeds from exporting those

commodities are then used to buy food for local consumption. According to the theory, everyone will benefit.

The theory, as it turns out, does not translate well to reality. Rather than providing universal benefits, the global food system has been a major cause of hunger and environmental destruction around the world.

The global system demands centralised collection of tremendous quantities of single crops, leading to the creation of huge monocultures. Monocultures, in turn, require massive inputs of pesticides, herbicides and chemical fertilisers. These practices systematically eliminate biodiversity from farmland, and lead to soil erosion, eutrophication of waterways, and the poisoning of surrounding ecosystems. 'Food miles' (the distance food travels from farm to plate) have gone up astronomically, making food transport a major contributor to fossil fuel use, pollution, and greenhouse gas emissions. In the US, for example, transporting food within the nation's borders accounts for over 20 percent of all commodity transport, and results in at least 120 million tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions every year. In the UK, imports of food and animal feed require over 83 billion tonne-kms of transport, use 1.6 billion litres of fuel, and emit more than 4 million tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub>. Much of this transport is utterly needless, since the 'logic' of global trade leads countries to simultaneously import and export the exact same commodities.

As farms have become larger and more mechanised, the number of farmers has steadily declined. The six founding countries of Europe's Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) had 22 million farmers in 1957; today that number has fallen to about seven million. In the US, 6.8 million farms were in operation in 1935; today there are only one-fourth as many.

Decades of government support for global trade have concentrated wealth and power in ever larger corporations, which increasingly dominate every aspect of the global food supply – from seed and feed to everything on supermarket shelves. Today just two companies, Cargill and Archer Daniels Midland, control 70 to 80 percent of the world's grain trade. One agribusiness, Philip Morris, gets ten cents out of every American food dollar – more than earned by all US farmers combined. People are generally unaware that most of what they spend on food goes to corporate middlemen, not farmers. In the US, for example, distributors, marketers, and input suppliers take 91 cents out of every food dollar, while

farmers keep only 9 cents. As global corporations take over food marketing, small shopkeepers are also being squeezed out: in the 1990s alone, some 1,000 independent food shops – grocers, bakers, butchers and fishmongers – closed in the UK each year.

In the South, the globalisation of food is driving literally millions of farming families from the land. Throughout the South, most of those displaced people will end up in urban slums – without community, without connection to the land, without a secure and healthy food supply.

New additives and processes are continually developed to extend storage time. For harried consumers, food corporations also provide ‘convenience’ foods that can be re-heated quickly in a microwave and even items like ‘macaroni and cheese on a stick’ which can be eaten with one hand. Nutritional content? We’re told not to worry, since some of the nutrients destroyed in processing can supposedly be reinserted. Flavour? Hundreds of additives are on hand to mimic the taste and texture of real food. Food quality? With producers in a competitive race to the bottom, it’s not surprising that food poisoning cases are steadily increasing, and new diseases like ‘Mad Cow Disease’ have appeared.

### **The benefits of going local**

But what, exactly, is ‘local food’? If the essence of global food is a plastic-wrapped, highly processed slab of junk that has been transported thousands of miles, a local food system means fresh produce grown on nearby farms and sold at farmers’ markets and in independent local shops. For that reason, ‘food miles’ are relatively low, which greatly reduces fossil fuel use and pollution.

There are other environmental benefits as well. Global markets demand intensive and uniform (monocultural) production, which eliminates all but the cash crop from the land. On the other hand, local markets give farmers an incentive to diversify, creating niches on the farm for wild plant and animal species. Also, diversified farms cannot accommodate the heavy machinery used in monocultures, thereby eliminating a major cause of soil erosion. Diversification also lends itself to organic methods, making crops less susceptible to pests and thus reducing the need for artificial pesticides.

Rural economies in particular benefit from local food systems, as most of the money spent on food goes to the farmer, not distant corporations. Small, diversified farms benefit local

economies through job creation as well, since they are suited to human labour rather than massive equipment. For example, in the UK, farms under 100 acres provide five times more jobs per acre than those over 500 acres. Moreover, wages paid to farm workers benefit local economies and communities far more than money paid for heavy equipment and fuel that is almost immediately siphoned off to equipment manufacturers and oil companies.

### **Food quality**

Local food is almost always fresher – and therefore more nutritious – than global food. It also needs fewer preservatives or other additives, and organic methods can eliminate pesticide residues. Farmers can grow varieties that are best suited to local climate and soils, allowing flavour and nutrition to take precedence over extended shelf life and the whims of global markets.

Animal husbandry can be integrated with crop production, providing healthier, more humane conditions for animals and a non-chemical source of fertility. And if countries in the South were encouraged to use their labour and their best agricultural land for local needs rather than for luxury crops for Northern markets, hunger would diminish as well.

But even those who acknowledge its negative effects believe that the global food system is necessary because it produces more food and delivers it at a lower price. But this simply isn't true. Studies carried out all over the world show that small-scale, diversified farms produce a greater yield than large-scale monocultures. In fact, if providing food for the world's hungry is the priority, then the shift towards local food systems should begin immediately, since they do a far better job of feeding people.

Although the cost of global food does not show up in the supermarket price, we pay for it in our taxes-to fund research into pesticides and biotech, to subsidise the transport, communications and energy infrastructures the system requires and to pay for the foreign aid that pulls Third World economies into the destructive global system.

We pay in other ways for the environmental costs of global food, which are degrading the planet our children will inherit.

How do we go local?

Sadly, despite the evidence, most policymakers support the further globalisation of food--in the belief that more trade is always better. As a result, identical products are crisscrossing the

globe, with no other purpose than to enrich the corporations that control the global food supply.

An immediate first step would be to press for policy changes to insure that identical products are not being both imported and exported. If we eliminate needless trade in everything from wheat, milk and potatoes to apple juice and live animals, the reduction in transport alone would bring immediate benefits.

Such a step would require trade treaties to be rewritten, reestablishing the rights of citizens to protect their economies and resources.

Subsidies that now support the global food system would need to be shifted towards more localised systems. Governments have spent tremendous sums of taxpayers' money to prop up a costly food system which pretends to provide 'cheap' food. If even a fraction of that sum were devoted to supporting local food systems instead, the cost of local food would decrease substantially, and its availability would grow.

Shifts in energy policy are critically important, since the global food system relies on an energy infrastructure built upon fossil fuels. In the South, where the energy infrastructure is still being built up, a shift towards a decentralised renewable energy path could be easily implemented, at a fraction of the cost in dollars and human upheaval that huge dams, nuclear power and fossil fuels entail.

Recognising the importance of local knowledge is crucial to maintaining existing local food systems, and to reclaim those that have been largely lost. Today, a one-size-fits-all educational model is being imposed worldwide, eliminating much of the knowledge and skills people need to live prosperously on their own resources, in their own places on the earth.

Changes in tax policy would also help to promote food localisation. Now, tax credits for capital- and energy-intensive technologies favour the largest and most global producers. Meanwhile the more labour-intensive methods of small-scale diversified producers are penalised through income taxes, payroll taxes and other taxes on labour.

## **Re-regulating Global Trade, Deregulating Local Trade**

As we've seen, the steady deregulation of global trade and finance has led to the emergence of giant corporations whose activities are highly polluting and socially exploitative. This in turn has created a need for ever more social and environmental regulations, along with a massive bureaucracy to administer them. That bureaucracy is strangling smaller businesses with paperwork, inspections, fines, and the costs are needless, yet now compulsory. The burden is too great for the small business to bear, while the big happily pay up and grow bigger as their smaller competitors die out. How many dairies have gone out of business because they had to have stainless steel sinks, when porcelain had served them well for generations?

Today, there is an urgent need for national and regional governments to control the activities of multinational corporations. At the same time, there is an equally urgent need to relax the controls on local trade, which by its very nature is far less likely to damage human health and the environment.

### Turning the tide

These shifts would open up space for thousands of community-based initiatives – many of them already underway – to flourish. From Community Supported Agriculture and box schemes to farmers' markets, food co-ops, and buy-local campaigns, people have already begun the hands-on work needed to rebuild their local food systems. But these efforts will fall short if government policies continue to tilt the playing field towards the large and global.

When government ministers blindly promote trade for the sake of trade while at the same time discussing reductions in CO2 emissions, it is easy to despair. But activists and citizens alike need to unite and exert powerful pressure from below.

Already, unprecedented alliances have been created. Environmentalists and labour unionists, farmers and deep ecologists, people from North and South – are saying 'no' to a systems that destroys jobs as quickly as it destroys species, that threatens the livelihood of farmers while driving up the price of healthy food in the marketplace.

Still more work is needed to reveal the connections between our many crises, to spell out the truth about trade and the way we measure progress, and to graphically describe the ecological, social, psychological and economic benefits of localising and decentralising our economies.

Shortening the links between farmers and consumers may be one of the most strategic and enjoyable ways to bring about fundamental change for the better. It should satisfy and empower us to know that by taking a step which is so good for us and our families, we are also encouraging diversity, protecting jobs and preserving the environment all over the world.

This article is adapted from the book *Bringing the Food Economy Home: Local Alternatives to Global Agribusiness*, published by Kumarian Press (US), Zed Books (UK) and Fernwood Press (Canada).